

## **‘I thought Pepys’s Diaries would work well as a weblog - and it now gets 20,000 visitors each month’**

Lucie Skeaping puts some questions to Phil Gyford, creator and proprietor of pepysdiary.com

I came across pepysdiary.com some years ago when I was working on a BBC Radio 3 programme about music in Pepys’s London. Those Club members who’ve already discovered it will know what a great resource it is, how clearly the content is presented and how easy it is to find your way around.

But who is the man behind it, and how did it all come about? Phil Gyford (right) kindly agreed to answer a few questions:



*LS: Phil, how did you come to create pepysdiary.com and how long has it been running?*

*PG:* Towards the end of 2002 I was thinking of reading the Diary. I knew very little about Pepys but thought his writing might be interesting, given I’d lived in London for a few years. However, the sight of all those volumes on a bookshelf was a bit daunting. Around this time weblogs were newly popular and I thought Pepys’ Diaries would work well as a weblog – that is, as a website with a single diary entry posted on the front page each day. It seemed such a simple and obvious idea I thought someone must have created such a website already, but I couldn’t find one. I discovered that the text for the 1893 Wheatley edition of the Diaries was out of copyright and was freely available online as one large file. So I decided to make a website using this.

*LS: What’s your own background – are you a historian, or perhaps more of a techie? And where are you based?*

*PG:* I’ve designed and programmed websites as both a career and a hobby for over twenty years. I grew up in Essex and I’ve lived in the Barbican for fourteen years, which puts me roughly in the middle of many of Pepys’ journeys between his home and Westminster during the Diary period.

*LS: There’s so much detail on the site – every Diary entry is meticulously laid out and easy to find with a few simple clicks. Did you have to read the Diary many times over? I expect you know it very well by now!*

*PG:* I hadn't read any of the Diary when I started the site, and I only read each Diary entry as I prepared it for appearing on the website. I had to pay close attention to the text while preparing it for the site, such as adding links to related pages and so on, so I know it very well now!

*LS: pepysdiary.com also features useful information posted by other people. Many seem to be 'hard-core' Pepys fans, discussing parts of the Diary in great detail. How did that come about?*

*PG:* Most weblogs, back in 2002, featured comments from readers at the bottom of each blog post, so it seemed natural to have them at the bottom of every Diary entry. At the suggestion of a friend I called them 'annotations' instead of 'comments' to try and encourage a certain informational tone, and discourage general chatter, which has helped, I think.

I wasn't expecting to receive a lot of comments but the site became unexpectedly popular from the start, and was featured in places such as BBC News, NPR, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, among others. This meant the site had many more visitors than I expected – peaking at 87,000 page-views in one day during the first week – and so there were more comments than I anticipated. It also meant there were a lot of suggestions about how to improve the site, so the site changed quite a bit over the weeks, months and years that followed.

I don't know much about the people who post comments. Many of them have continued reading and contributing to the site over the years, even for the full duration of the Diary. People ask questions, help each other interpret what's going on, post information about things that require explanation, etc. It became a very important part of the website, making the reading experience much more interesting than it would otherwise have been, like an international book club. Frequent commentators keep in touch outside of the website and have occasionally met up 'in real life' too. There are currently 83,466 comments across the whole site, meaning every Diary entry is followed by a discussion between interested and friendly readers.

Around 40% of the site's visitors come from the UK, and 33% from the USA.

*LS: Do you have any feedback to your site from the academic world? Are you constantly responding to research queries?*

*PG:* I don't have much evidence for this, but I get the feeling that the website is perhaps a bit populist for the academic world. Certainly, I haven't had much contact with people I would think of as academics, compared to all the

amateur enthusiasts from around the world who get in touch and contribute to the site. Maybe the website isn't seen as rigorous enough to be thought of as 'academic'? This is understandable compared to the printed volumes edited by Latham & Matthews, which are an amazing work. I think those books and my website offer different experiences of the Diary, both useful in different ways.

*LS: How much time do you spend on the Pepys Diary site? Is it a major part of your life? And what do you do when not involved in Pepysian matters?*

*PG:* I spend less time on the site than I did during the nine years and five months while working through the Diary for the first time. By the end of that period I was spending about a day every week preparing Diary entries for the site. This involved adding links to background information about all the people, places and things Pepys mentioned. When I started the site I didn't do much of this but as the Diary progressed, I felt it needed to be more thorough. Now, each of these topics has its own page, creating part of the site that's a cross between an encyclopedia and an index, and it contains more than 5,000 topics.

In 2013 the website started posting Diary entries on the front page again, starting from the beginning, for a second reading of the Diary. This time I already had all the text in the system, so there's a lot less work to do. This second reading is continuing and we're now part-way through 1665.

*LS: Is Pepys on Twitter too?*

*PG:* @samuelpepys tweets several times a day, as if he's doing the things he wrote about in real time! For example, he tweets about dinner in the middle of the day, comments on a play he's just seen in the afternoon, or mentions how hard he's working late at night. For those who use Twitter it's a remarkably immediate way to experience an admittedly truncated version of the Diary, because it feels so 'real time'. @samuelpepys now has over 58,000 followers, many of whom regularly reply to him. It's a nice way for people who would never read the entire Diary to experience an aspect of Samuel Pepys's life.

*LS: What do you personally feel about Samuel Pepys, his life and his world? Do you think you would have enjoyed meeting him? What parts of his character do you particularly like, or dislike?*

*PG:* It was fascinating to read the Diary for the first time, knowing little about either Pepys or the period when I started. I now know a lot more about a

specific decade in the 17th century than I do any other period! It was a fascinating time, quite aside from everything Pepys himself did.

I imagine that most people who have read the Diary have some mixed feelings about Pepys. He's impressive for so many things he achieved through his work and skill. But because he was so frank in the Diary about his faults, we also know about his less appealing aspects. Some of these – such as his vanities – are probably common to many of us, but aren't shared as openly as his have now been. Others are more troubling to modern ears, and increasingly so after Weinstein, #MeToo, etc. It's hard to laugh off some of the events.

*LS: For those Club members not familiar with pepysdiary.com, please give us a general overview of the purpose of the site, its content, and any 'mission statement' and as you see it.*

*PG:* The website features all 3,433 Diary entries, with the entry for 'today' in a particular year appearing on the front page towards the end of the day, as if Pepys had just written and published it. Over the course of almost a decade the site works through the entire diary one day at a time. Readers can also choose to receive each Diary entry by e-mail, or read excerpts of it in 'real time' on Twitter.

Each Diary entry features links to pages in the site's Encyclopedia, containing further information. There are more than 5,000 of these topics, which include: 2,809 people Pepys mentions; hundreds of places around London, the UK and abroad, most of them plotted on maps; 156 plays; 192 books; 159 ships; and nine types of coin. Each topic has a graph showing how often (and when) it was mentioned in the Diary, annotations from readers, and often text from Wikipedia.

The site also contains forty-eight letters sent to or by Pepys, a chart showing his wealth over the course of the Diary, a map of many of the places he visited, and an extensive family tree. We also have dozens of articles written by readers of the site expanding on topics such as the Navy Office's garden, the relationship between Sir George Carteret and King Charles II, and reviews of books related to Pepys and his time.

Over the course of a month the site gets around 20,000 visitors, and 100,000 page-views.

*LS: Many thanks, Phil – and many thanks, Sam!*

